



Toward Comprehensive State Youth Policy

*Based on presentation by Thaddeus Ferber
to the California State Youth Council*

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On December 23, 2002, the White House announced the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth, to develop a comprehensive Federal response, under existing authorities and programs, to the problems of youth failure, with a focus on enhanced agency accountability and effectiveness. This work is critical and long overdue. According to the presidential memorandum which established the task force,

the Federal Government has spent billions of dollars over the last 30 years in a variety of programs to address these issues. A 1998 analysis by the General Accounting Office has pointed out that there were 117 Federal programs administered by 15 departments aimed at disadvantaged youth. Some of these programs have been very successful. However, overall, the Federal Government's efforts and programs to assist disadvantaged young people have been fragmented and not as successful as hoped.

Likewise, states have spent billions of dollars aimed at disadvantaged youth, administered by a similar array of departments and agencies. And while some of their efforts may have been “fragmented and not as successful as hoped” as well, overall states have been far more successful than the federal government in devising and implementing coordinated responses to reduce youth failure and increase youth opportunities. Indeed, a large number of states had established coordinating structures -- public-private task forces, joint legislative committees and interagency councils -- over the past decade. These entities play a critical role in improving states’ commitments to youth, primarily by monitoring and aligning the financial and technical resources they offer communities. Closer to local realities than the federal government, yet with a wider preview than local delivery systems, state governments are uniquely positioned to be able to look across the wide array of services and supports provided to young people and to join forces with communities to answer three questions:

- How do the pieces connect? How could efforts be better aligned?
- Are there any blind spots? By focusing on some areas of work are other critical areas being unintentionally neglected?
- What does all this activity add up to? What has been accomplished, and how much ground is left to cover?

Over the past year, the Forum has documented and supported state-level efforts to create a more comprehensive response to young people’s needs. Below, I reflect on this work to reinforce some of the positive actions the California State Youth Council has already undertaken.

Essential Elements of the Vision

The State Youth Council's draft discussion document represents a clear, compelling plan to create a state youth policy. The document effectively integrates three essential themes which position it well:

1) Positive Goals. The state youth council's plan looks above and beyond traditional deficit-focused visions (e.g., preventing teen pregnancy; preventing gang violence; preventing drug use) toward an affirming and engaging vision: to "maximize the potential of each of our state's youth.")

2) Investment in Youth and Involvement by Youth. Advocacy efforts often focus either on providing more resources to youth, or increasing the involvement of youth. The state youth council's plan effectively incorporates both critical themes, advocating for increasing both investments in young people and involvement by young people.

3) An Overarching Policy Framework. Across the country, states are working to increase the coherence and effectiveness of their youth policies. All states have myriad programs, policies and initiatives devoted to changing outcomes for young people; many are now working to develop an overarching "youth policy" that serves as a lens or framework used to coordinate and align these various efforts. This work is not easy – there are important historic reasons why youth policies have not been viewed in a comprehensive fashion through a single lens. Lack of clarity can help protect turf and obscure gaps and overlaps in services and resources. It allows policy makers and advocates to take on any one piece — no matter how small — and declare victory. Increasingly, however, the lack of coherence is being seen as a liability. As the State Legislative Leaders Foundation reports, "Building a coherent message on children's policy is challenging, however, because there is no clearly discernable legislative agenda for children and families; rather, a multitude of individuals and organizations with different agendas are sending mixed messages about what is best for children."¹ Especially in these times of budget crunches, states are looking to make their investments more strategically. And more often than not, when it comes to investments in young people, making more strategic investments means moving from the standard disjointed array of youth policies toward a more aligned and better coordinated approach based on an overarching plan.

The Balance between Creating a Long Term Plan and Immediate Action: From Planning Mode to Campaign Mode

As worthy as the State Youth Councils draft plan is, at the end of the day, it remains a "plan to create a plan." There are two main risks in long, drawn out planning processes. First, engagement and motivation of the planning group may dwindle. Creating a comprehensive plan will require the active engagement of a wide range of stakeholders. Obtaining and sustaining attention over time may be difficult. Second, once written, plans can end up on shelves, and never be implemented: overarching plans requiring large scale changes across departmental lines may be the least likely to be implemented.

Efforts that manage to plan, campaign and act simultaneously may be the most likely to succeed. When Deborah Alvarez-Rodriguez was asked what accounted for her success in forging overarching policy strategies for youth when she was the director of the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Their

¹ State Legislative Leaders Foundation. (1995). *State Legislative Leaders: Keys to Effective Legislation for Children and Families*. Centerville, MA: State Legislative Leaders Foundation.

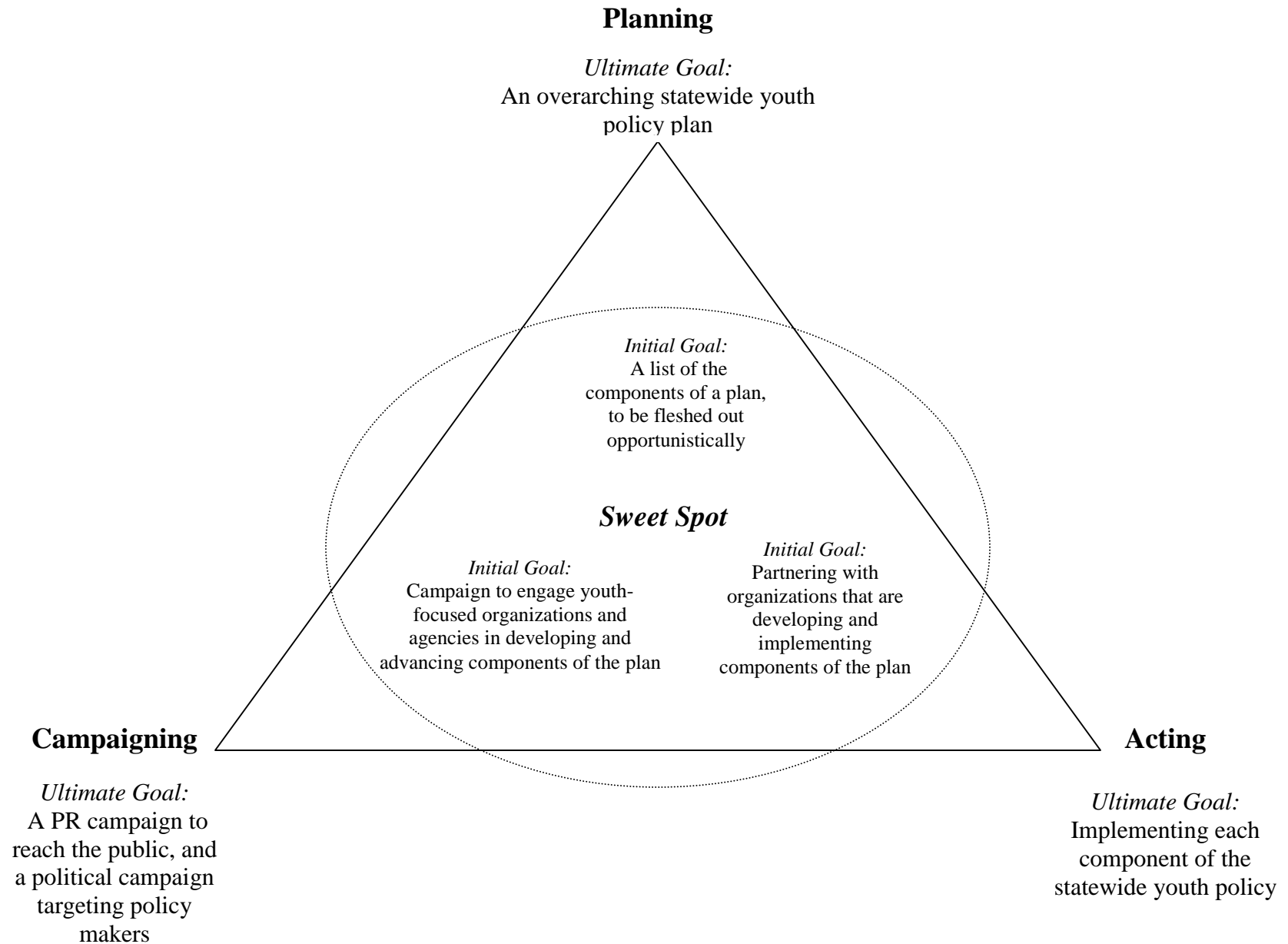
Families, she replied “It takes a multifaceted approach to accomplish something like that. There is no easy formula — you need to have all the pistons running at the same time. Juggling all the balls simultaneously creates a tidal wave. You need to create the wave, then catch it.” Likewise, the State Youth Council would be well-advised to “create the wave, than catch it.”

The “Sweet Spot” between Planning, Campaigning and Acting

Shifting from strategic planning mode to campaign mode may represent a positive mind-shift. But skipping over planning to launch a statewide campaign would be equally risky. The Forum for Youth Investment plays close attention to building momentum – to increasing the number of people and groups coming together to tackle common tasks. Experience suggests that the most effective way to build momentum is to achieve the proper balance of planning, campaigning and acting. The ultimate planning goal may be to create an overarching statewide youth plan. An initial goal which may begin to create some momentum may be to simply create a compelling list of components of a plan which are to be developed opportunistically. The ultimate campaign goal may be to launch a PR campaign to reach the public, and a political campaign targeting policy makers. An initial goal which may begin to create some momentum may be to launch a focused campaign to engage youth-focused organizations and policy makers in a joint effort to develop and advance sections of the overall youth plan. The ultimate action goal may be to implement each component of the state youth policy. An initial goal which may begin to create some momentum may be to partner with organizations that are developing and implementing components of the plan.

The hardest way to build momentum is to start from a stand still. The Forum has achieved its biggest successes when it has found moving trains, hopped on board, and helped align them toward similar goals. Likewise, the State Youth Council could be intentionally opportunistic in looking for places to develop and test the utility of different pieces of the overall youth plan, while simultaneously adding value to California-based organizations and efforts. Through such an approach, the overarching state policy plan could emerge organically out of ongoing efforts. As such, it could be presented more as a report on progress to date, and less as a “end-all-be-all” plan that may be too unwieldy to lift.

The “Sweet Spot” between Planning, Campaigning and Acting



Components of Statewide Youth Policy – a Toolkit for All Youth, One System

Aligning the current array of departments, agencies and programs into a coherent “all youth, one system” approach will not be easy. Indeed, it will require a number of new tools which will allow policy makers to think, plan and act in new, cross-sector ways. These tools will be needed at all levels – from local to federal. The State Youth Council would do a great service to the field if it were to partner with organizations throughout California to develop any or all of these tools, including:

- *A Coordinating Body.* A common vehicle for policy makers across systems (education, juvenile justice, youth employment, community service, etc.) and potentially across sectors (government, foundation, corporate) to take action on the big picture issues of 1) how the pieces of individual efforts connect, 2) how could efforts be better aligned, 3) what blind spots exist, and 4) what does all the activity add up to?
- *An Overarching Youth Policy Framework.* A way to frame, monitor and enhance a state’s overall commitment to young people across departmental lines.
- *A Youth Policy Impact Tool.* Common standards through which to evaluate whether any given policy promotes positive youth development, regardless of what sector it emerges from.
- *Youth Policy Report.* Using the youth policy framework and the youth policy impact tool to show a state’s progress across departmental lines, to highlight best practices from across departments, and to present goals and strategies for the future.
- *Youth Progress Report.* An organized, cross-sector way to collect and report indicators of the development of young people that (1) presents the information within a clear framework, and (2) balances indicators of what we want to prevent with what we want to promote.
- *Youth Options Report.* An assessment of the array of services, supports and opportunities which are available to young people, including the range of ways they are being involved in policymaking at all levels, as well as future goals and strategies.
- *Communications Campaign.* Tested messages and messengers that promote a positive picture of youth, and link together the array of things young people need into a coherent agenda.
- *Program Quality Strategy.* Clear evaluation criteria, program-quality standards, and capacity building strategies for achieving them, which are applied across departments and agencies.
- *Statewide Youth Network.* An alliance of organizations and individuals committed to youth from across sectors and systems, who are ready and willing to advocate on behalf of young people across issues and sectors.

Next Steps

First, position the State Youth Council in the “sweet spot,” by quickly drafting out the components of a statewide youth policy that it wishes to see developed (such as those above), and announcing its intention to partner with any and all California-based organizations who are interested in helping to develop any of the tools which will be integral parts of the statewide youth policy. An interim goal for the Council could be becoming the “go to” organization in California when any group is attempting to take on aligning tasks such as those above.

Second, build upon the work of the local youth councils, but quickly push beyond them. Many of the tasks listed above are being tackled by local youth councils. Many, for example, are working on local versions of Youth Options Reports. In order to position itself as the State Youth Council, and not as the more targeted State Youth Employment Council, it will be important to move beyond just the local youth councils. This will mean finding local partners who are doing cross-cutting work but who are not local youth councils. As one travels the country, it quickly becomes clear that there is no one type of organization that is always the most appropriate to take on local aligning work. In some places it is the local community foundation. In others it is the United Way. In others it is city government. In order to be seen as a neutral player, the State Youth Council should support the efforts of local youth councils, but also of other local entities that are undertaking aligning tasks.

Third, develop an informal “kitchen cabinet” of advisors to help the State Youth Council 1) revise the list of components to be developed; 2) identify and broker partnerships with California-based organizations who may be interested in working on any of the tools; 3) help strategize on ways to get more youth-focused organizations and agencies excited about and involved in the work of the State Youth Council.

Fourth, ask for help. If the first three steps above are done well, enough interest and momentum should be created to raise money to support the effort. Each component of the state youth plan will take significant resources to tackle. One fundraising strategy would be to first raise a small amount of money for the core function of the Council, including whatever general consulting support you may find useful. With that in place, you could attempt to raise money for each component/task separately, by first seeking a partner organization who wants to tackle the task with you, and then jointly fundraising for it, again, building in whatever supports from national organizations that you find helpful.

In conclusion, the State Youth Council would be well-advised to take Girls Inc.’s slogan to heart, and be “Strong, Smart and Bold.” Build a strong coalition of likeminded individuals and organizations, be smart in quickly crafting drafting compelling frameworks, and be bold in partnering with a few organizations to start moving pieces of the work to build momentum.